

Corporate Improvement Scrutiny Committee – Meeting held on Tuesday, 29th October, 2024.

Present:- Councillors Stedmond (Chair), Hulme (Vice-Chair), Ajaib, Matloob, Rana, W. Sabah and Tomar

Also present under Rule 30:- Councillors Gahir, Shah and Smith

Apologies for Absence:- Councillors Dauti, O’Kelly and Satti

PART 1

76. Declarations of Interest

No declarations were made.

77. Minutes of the last meeting

Resolved – That the minutes of the meeting held on 24th September 2024 be approved as a correct record.

78. Attendance Report

Resolved – That the record of Members’ attendance for the 2024/25 municipal year be noted.

79. Slough Children First Annual report and Business Plan

The Committee considered a report on Slough Children First’s (SCF) Annual Report for 2023/24 and the emerging and updated business and improvement plan for 2025/26. Sarah Wilson summarised the report as the ‘shareholder representative’ for the Council. Officers of SCF including the Chief Executive, Sue Butcher; Director of Operations, Ben Short; and Director of Finance, Alex Pilgerstorfer were present and responded to Members comments and queries during the course of the discussion.

The Leader of the Council also addressed the committee and explained the approach the Cabinet was taking to both continue the improvement in children’s services and manage the company effectively.

The background to the company and history of Department for Education (DfE) intervention in Slough over the past decade was. Since 2021 SCF had been a wholly-owned company of Slough Borough Council and it delivered children’s social care services with education functions moving back to the Council. The respective roles of the SCF Board and the Council as the owner of the company were set out, including the arrangements for scrutiny of strategic objectives, financial performance, governance and service delivery.

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Members considered the Annual Report for 2023/24 that looked back at performance during that period and informed the priorities for the business and improvement plan for 2025/26 that would be considered by the Cabinet in December 2024.

During the course of the discussion the following areas were scrutinised:

- Budget – the budget for the company had increased in previous years following the DfE commissioned Mutual Ventues report, but more recently the company had been required to make savings to contribute to the Council's wider financial recovery. The report set out where further savings could be made and Members asked about the risks associated with the proposed £2m reduction in contract sum. Savings had been made through exiting the Innovate team; reduced numbers of Looked After Children requiring residential placements; and increased financial controls. The SCF Chief Executive highlighted that the company had improved its practice and that 'good practice cost less money'. Assurance was provided that the company had sufficient funding for the current year and into next year and the budget plans and modelling detailed in Appendix B was robust and would form the basis of the business and improvement plan. There was a mechanism in the contract that if the company felt funding was insufficient an in-year request could be made to the Council.
- Performance – it was asked why the report did not contain an update on progress against the key performance indicators (KPIs) that had been agreed last December so they could be scrutinised, particularly whether the savings the company was making had impacted on performance. In response it was noted that company had been seeking to align its finances with performance and the business and improvement plan had therefore been combined. There were currently 20 indicators in the contract which covered a range of areas including practice, finance, governance and engagement and an overview was given in relation to key indicators. Monthly contract management meetings were held at which KPIs were monitored. Several performance indicators were reported to other bodies such as the Corporate Parenting Panel. CISC may wish to conduct future scrutiny on particular areas of work focusing on key areas of risk.
- Youth Offending Service – Members asked about the implications arising from the recent inspection of the service which indicated the trajectory of improvement was downward, although some areas of improvement had also been recognised. It was noted that preliminary feedback had been provided and the full report was awaited. Transformation funding to support improvements to the service was one option being considered.
- Audit and risk – Members asked about the progress being made in relation to audit and addressing the two 'red' RAG rated areas which were SCF having an effective risk management system; and care

experienced young people in education, employment and training. It was responded that the company had separate external auditors and the companies accounts were up to date. There was a relationship with the Council's external auditors given the scale and risks a company such as SCF had for the Council including the Value for Money assessments. Regular updates on governance improvements had been provided to the Audit & Corporate Governance Committee.

A number of other specific questions were raised during the discussion including about family hubs, the use of technology and the position regarding the £5m loan given to the company by the Council to provide initial working capital. In response it was noted that the company was in a position to repay the loan subject to certain conditions such as the mechanism for securing additional in-year funding if that was required in the future.

At the conclusion of the discussion the report was noted.

Resolved –

- (a) That the performance of SCF as noted in its Annual Report 2023/24 be noted.
- (b) That the proposed workstreams to be included in the draft Business and Improvement plan 2025/26 that would be submitted to Cabinet for approval in December 2024 be noted.

80. Report from the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner

The Chair welcomed the Thames Valley Police & Crime Commissioner, Matthew Barber, to the meeting. The Commissioner introduced a report that provided an update on the Police & Crime Commissioner's strategic priorities for Thames Valley Police as set out in the Police & Crime Plan.

The Commissioner was joined by Chief Constable, Jason Hogg; TVP Commander for Berkshire East, Steve Raffield; and Local Area Commander for Slough, Helen Kenny who also addressed the committee and responded to questions and comments from Members during the course of the discussion.

The Police & Crime Plan was based around three key themes – protecting communities, protecting people and protecting properties. It contained a number of priorities which included tackling domestic abuse; rape and sexual offences; anti-social behaviour and serious violence. The Commissioner described the work he had led to improve neighbourhood policing and highlighted the importance of partnership working including with the Council. This included the work of the Safer Slough Partnership and Thames Valley wide activity such as the Violence Prevention Partnership. The Chief Constable summarised his priorities for policing, provided an updated on various operational matters and underlined TVPs commitment to localism and working closely with the Council.

Members of the committee recognised and commended TVP for the vital and challenging work TVP officers were doing every day to seek to protect communities across Slough.

A wide variety of issues were raised during the course of the discussion including the progress in tackling the problem of violent crime in the borough, which Members highlighted was a particular concern to residents. The Chief Constable indicated that TVP took an intelligence led approach which utilised data and targeted hot spots with increased visibility of officers. Technology was increasingly being utilised and it was considered that the approach was having an impact.

Plans were also in place to address domestic abuse and a Member commented on the positive progress made by TVP in recent years to seek to intervene earlier and give the issue a higher priority.

The Commissioner was asked about the deterioration over the past decade in the assessment of Thames Valley Police by His Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary which had moved from outstanding to key areas as requiring improvement and 'protecting vulnerable people' considered to be inadequate. The Commissioner responded by stating such external inspections were helpful in identifying areas for improvement and holding the Chief Constable to account. However, it was noted that the benchmarks and categorisation in the assessments had changed over time which made comparisons difficult.

Other issues raised included the role of the Council, working with the Police to address the growing problem of anti-social behaviour in places such as Farnham Road. Members asked about the current position regarding recruitment to establish what progress was being made to make the force more representative of Slough in terms of ethnic minority and gender balance. The Chief Constable acknowledged the importance of the force being representative of the places it served and recognised that whilst progress had been made more needed to be done and he would welcome working with councillors and other partners.

Speaking under Rule 30, Councillor Gahir expressed his concern about the relatively high level of crime, including violent crime, in Slough compared to other areas and the impact this had on residents perceptions of the town as a safe place to live. The Commissioner responded to the points raised and highlighted that there was variation in crime levels across Berkshire and the wider Thames Valley but the overall levels of violent crime was coming down. It was acknowledged by the Commissioner that violent crime and knife crime remained a significant issue that needed to be tackled but he would not characterise Slough as a dangerous town.

At the conclusion of the discussion the Chair thanked the Commissioner and TVP officers for their attendance at the committee. The report was noted.

Resolved – That the update of the Thames Valley Police and Crime Commissioner be noted.

81. CISC Forward Plan: Update.

The Committee considered a report on the Work Programme for the committee for the remainder of the 2024/25 municipal year. It contained some minor changes to the plan agreed by the committee in July. A more formal opportunity to review the plan would take place at the mid-year review workshop scheduled for 17th December 2024.

Members were updated on the position regarding scrutiny arrangements for children's services. The Chair and Vice-Chair had been held with both the DfE and Best Value Commissioners and it had been agreed, on balance, that rather than establish a separate children's focussed scrutiny committee at this stage the best option would be for CISC to undertake a full day of scrutiny on children's services on an annual basis to identify any areas that may warrant more detailed scrutiny. The update was noted.

The Committee also considered the potential arrangements for scrutiny of the improvement plans following publication of the Commissioners 5th Report and update letter which, amongst other matters, indicated the intervention would be extended by a further two years to the end of November 2026. This was subject to confirmation and the plans for scrutiny arrangements would be considered as part of the wider Member level engagement which was likely to include an update to full Council on 28th November.

Resolved –

- (a) That the current Work Programme as at Appendix A to the report be noted.
- (b) That the update on the pending mid-term review and developments regarding children's scrutiny be noted.

82. Date of Next Meeting

The date of the next meeting was scheduled as 26th November 2024.

Chair

(Note: The Meeting opened at 6.30 pm and closed at 9.03 pm)